

N.J. Meadows (Cunningham)

By JOHN T. CUNNINGHAM

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TOMORROW HAS ALL



Development of the Jersey Meadows has not lacked dreamers. Among them were seniors at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn who last year tackled the problem. Best solution in the class assignment was this plan for continuous loop of apartments, rising 30 stories above the marshes. Walled city would contain some 600,000 residents. The cost was not estimated.

- Who Really Owns the Meadows?
- Just How Extensive Are They?
- Who Will Reclaim the Marshes?
- Where Will the Money Come From?

RAIN poured out of the low gray sky, soaking further dejection into the dreariness that in late winter weighs on the Jersey Meadows. If ever there was a time to despair, about meadowland reclamation or progress in general, this was it. But this day, as never before, the bright thrill of seeing mankind tear into a frontier came sharply home to me.

This day, as well, past and future merged as we boarded a sluggish workboat in Bound Creek to look at the new Port Elizabeth being created

Despite the alternating optimism and pessimism, some planners are keeping alive the dream of the Jersey Meadows. Last of a series.

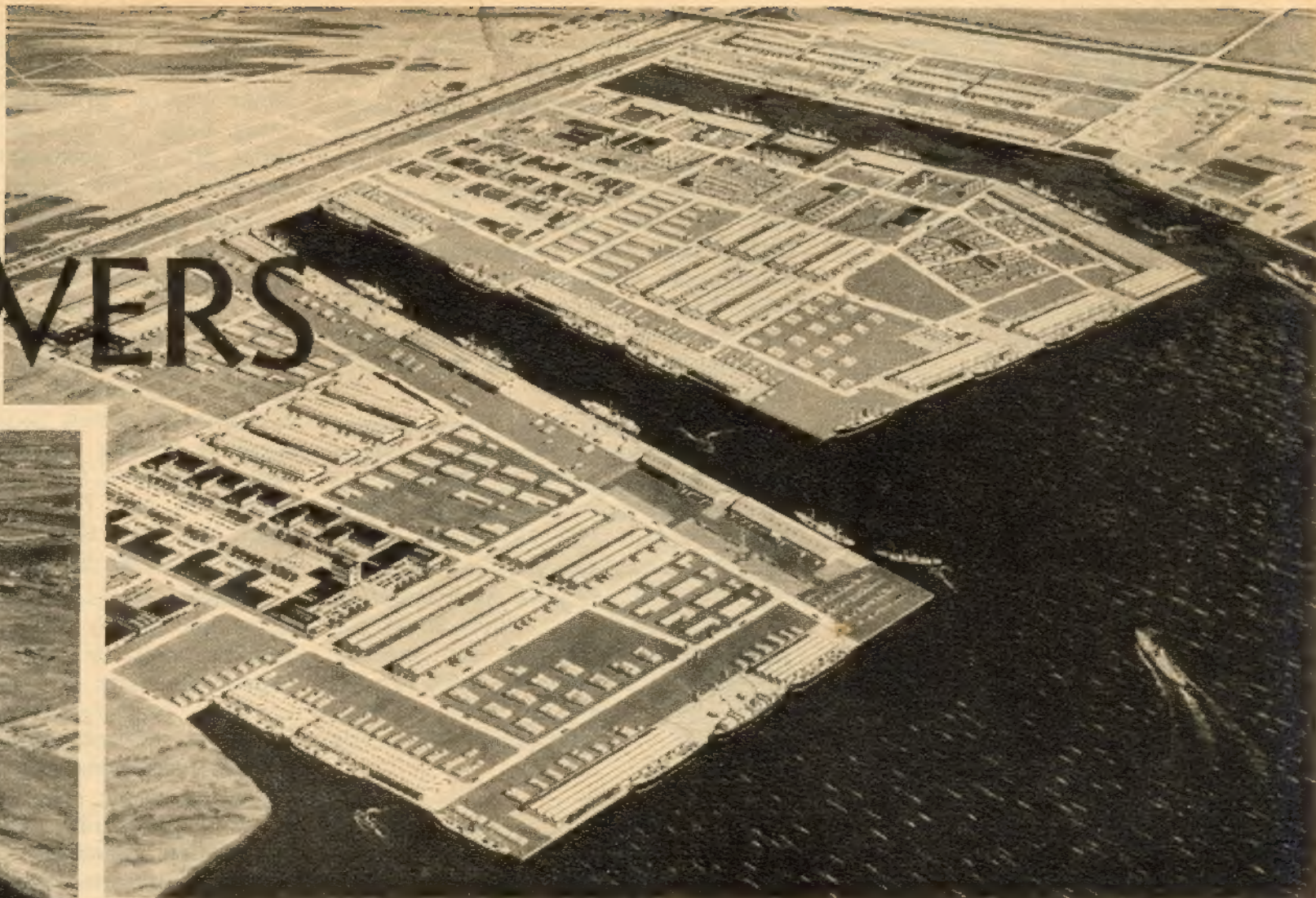
in the north Elizabeth meadows. Past surrounded us—in Bill Ballenski's salt hay ricks abandoned nearby, in the wall of foxtails between our boat and the New Jersey Turnpike, and, appallingly, in the raw sewage fouling Bound Creek in the worst 18th century tradition.

To the east through the mist, however, lay the outline of tomorrow—in a great wide channel, 7,200 feet long and 800 feet wide: The Port Elizabeth of the coming decades. There, quite clearly, is proof of something heard again and again whenever experts talk of meadowland reclamation:

"All it needs is imagination, leadership and money."

Now at Port Elizabeth the Port of New York Authority has taken its first major fresh bite in the Jersey Meadows. This is not discounting the spectacular strides the authority has made since leasing Port Newark and Newark Airport in 1948, but it is not

THE ANSWERS



More realistic view of the future in the meadows is rendering by Port Authority of new docks at Port Elizabeth, a \$150,000,000 project rising out of North Elizabeth wasteland. LEFT: A dredge chewing new channel for the piers.

forgetting either that the initial leadership and imagination for both of these came from Newark officialdom. In Port Elizabeth the future is totally Port Authority leadership and bank-roll versus the challenge of virgin land.

THE Port Authority has proved it has imagination and leadership in large measure. It also has the big money meadowland conquering demands—and the 150 million dollars the authority will spend in turning north Elizabeth wasteland into flourishing dockside facilities is the vital ingredient. This kind of pioneering isn't exactly akin to the rush of penniless settlers into Western homesteads, yet it is the kind of action that will help kill the myth that the Jersey Meadows are a mystery beyond redemption.

To see this dream taking shape—to see this dragon of a myth being slain, Guy F. Tozzoli, youthful manager of the Port Authority's planning and construction division, and I toured the rain-spattered channel.

Our little boat circled the mighty floating dredge charged with transforming Bound Creek from a muddy, polluted ditch into a ship channel. From a distance the dredge looked like a Mississippi River packet boat; up close it looked and sounded more like a floating factory, as large as five or six ordinary houses. From the dredge's stern a 30-inch pipeline extended across Bound Creek and far into the meadows. Through this line eventually will flow 14 million cubic yards being dredged to make a 35-foot-deep channel. That mud and clay, spread on nearby meadows, will help reclaim them, too.

Anyone who can view this project without a tingling excitement just isn't aware of the fact that frontiers can be close to home. My eye roved across the flat marshland toward Elizabeth, across land never exploited but now on the drawing board for transformation into a great port with berths for 24 ocean-going vessels and with immense warehousing, storage and shipping facilities. From worse than nothing to magnificence—isn't that pioneering as vivid as conquering Alaska, or the moon?

AS if reading my thoughts, Mr. Tozzoli said: "This is my dream of how to spend a lifetime. What better dreams could I have than looking forward to seeing this completed?"

That glowing hopefulness, set against the gloom of the day, typifies the larger aspect of all the unreclaimed Jersey Meadows. Alternating moods of hopefulness and gloom touch the mind: Optimistic awareness that the time is ripe for full reclamation; gloomy wonder if enough leadership and money can be found to reclaim the most valuable wasteland in the world.

The crux of the Jersey Meadows problem seems to boil down to this: Can 20th century civilization make the grand effort needed to redeem this wasteland?

Engineers have known for at least 40 years that full reclamation is possible. Oddly, nevertheless, a strong sentiment persists that there is still some sinister secret about the meadows—a secret that perhaps Dutch engineers could solve with dikes and locks and windmills and "a way with the sea," a mystery beyond the capabilities of American engineers who

have built the St. Lawrence Seaway and Boulder Dam and the New Jersey Turnpike and who each year reclaim in the United States thousands of acres of meadowland poorer than the Jersey Meadows.

ERNEST ERBER, executive director of the Passaic Valley Citizens Planning Assn., is confident about reclamation. Mr. Erber's high hopes are reflected in a series of reports prepared by his association—and particularly by Ralph M. Field of his staff—for five towns comprising the Meadowlands Regional Planning Board.

"I'm optimistic," Mr. Erber says, "because the incongruity of vacant land in the center of tremendous development is now so stark that a very large portion of the general public feels a challenge. Thirty years ago the Jersey Meadows were principally a concern of the technician; now many people are concerned."

Anticipation of full usage of the sprawling meadowland is nearing a peak. Political leaders at all levels—national, state, county and local—are showing concern, or at least in public statements manifesting great interest. Talk fills the sooty, scented air over the meadows; out of this may come the workable plan to make the meadows give way. Unfortunately, talk is cheap: If words were dollars, the meadows would have been reclaimed long ago.

Should there be a full flowering soon, give credit to those who planted the promising seed. Credit, therefore, the Meadowlands Regional Planning Board, composed of representatives of Carlstadt, Rutherford, East Rutherford, Lyndhurst and North Arlington. While others talked, these five banded

together in the summer of 1955 to see what could be done about lifting themselves out of the morass by their own bootstraps.

EVENTUALLY others may take credit—will take credit—but the high optimism in the spring of 1959 can be traced directly to the summer of 1955. Since then the five-town board has released three reports prepared by the Passaic Valley Citizens Planning Assn. The reports strike a serious meadowlands researcher as meticulous, thoughtful and practical. Most important, they have shot off the sparks that may ignite a bold fire of action for all the Jersey Meadows.

The Meadowlands Regional Planning Board was not the first to visualize reclamation, by any means. Full-blown schemes to conquer the area date back to 1815. The state geologist presented a major report on the Jersey Meadows in 1896. Then, in 1929 and 1930, two well-financed plans were presented by a regional plan group in New York and by the Meadow Reclamation Commission appointed by the New Jersey Legislature.

The reports of 1929 and 1930 both sketched handsome pictures of a bright future, replete with balanced industry, homes, parks and transportation facilities. Whether they were practical plans or mere "mud pie in the sky" made no difference; the depression days of the 1930s effectively engulfed both. As Mr. Erber has said, "They were still-born."

Depression doldrums were not the sole reason for making the 1929 and 1930 reports die. The simple fact is that New Jersey at that time had no compelling economic reason for tack-

(Continued on Following Page)

MEADOWS' FUTURE

(Continued from Preceding Page)

ling at great cost a barren swampland while splendid upland sites remained available.

DEVELOPMENTS within the last 10 years have changed the picture dramatically. Now those who press for quick development of the area point out that the cost of buying land and reclaiming it for industrial purposes is about the same for an acre of meadowland as for an acre of average upland. To prove the point, several meadowland builders are erecting—and selling—warehouses, small industrial plants and truck terminals.

The Meadowland Regional Board is studying a plan outlined by Messrs. Erber and Field for the 7,000 acres of meadows within their five towns. The plan, to oversimplify a detailed report, would rely mainly on a gas pipeline service road near the Hackensack River as an eastern dike. This road, with other "dikes" formed by railroad and highway embankments, would enclose a series of districts, each said to be possible of reclamation as individual units at relatively low cost.

There is no faulting the five-town group for being most interested in its own acreage in southern Bergen County, and the board is seeking ways of financing the project, possibly through a regional district with certain powers, such as condemning land, issuing bonds and other powers common to authorities.

It is no secret, however, that the five towns would not scorn federal or state aid; nor is the Passaic Valley Citizens Planning Assn. its only source of inspiration. Last fall a Dutch concern was hired to survey the broad area of the Hackensack River; now the board is studying the feasibility—and desirability—of a dam (and shipping locks) across the Hackensack River somewhere near Snake Hill.

SUCH a project quickly would throw the reclamation plans into a new dimension: Bergen County can discuss legally only the west side of such a dam—the east side would be on Hudson County land. Hence, into the picture enters the larger problem of intercounty cooperation, and the Hollanders couldn't be expected to know that Bergen and Hudson counties are of considerably different political hue.

This makes some kind of state or federal interest mandatory, since the Republican lion of Bergen and the Democratic lamb of Hudson (or maybe the lion and lamb are reversed) are not likely to lie down together, even for their own best interests. Add to these the political lions and lambs of Essex, Union and Middlesex counties and the bedding down together in the meadows gets to be much more complicated than the mere muddiness of the meeting ground.

This political rivalry as a reclamation factor is not far-fetched. Serious planners of reclamation place it high

on the list of obstacles, far higher than engineering problems.

Salvatore A. Bontempo, state commissioner of conservation and economic development, has called together the mayors of 26 towns to discuss their own meadowlands welfare. Out of such joint action might come a regional development commission with broad powers to acquire and develop land. The least that is likely is a multitown appeal for federal funds.

On the federal level there always has been strong verbal support from New Jersey congressmen and senators for meadowland reclamation. Rep. Frank Osmer (R-9th Dist) and others have been pushing for several years for a \$250,000 federal appropriation to survey the region. Three times the proposed appropriation has reached President Eisenhower's desk in fat multibillion omnibus bills. Three times the President has vetoed the bills.

EXCEPT for some muskrat trappers or pheasant hunters, practically everyone is for meadows reclamation or at least a "study" or "survey" or "discussion" or "preliminary talks." The real test is not who is "for" reclamation. As one veteran (slightly cynical) Jersey Meadows student puts it:

"Who could be against reclamation, as long as it's just talk?"

The true accounting, of course, will come when the cost is laid on the table. Surveys and studies can be di-

versions. There is no need to make firm decisions as long as "studies" are under way or "preliminary talks" are being held. Yet a sound, down-to-earth, and not necessarily expensive, survey of all the region is necessary.

There are many basic things a survey should set validly in place. For example, exactly how much meadowland remains to be reclaimed? As of now, it's anybody's guess. You read or hear many estimates: 35,000 acres, 30,000 acres, 18,000 acres, and so on. It's probably about 20,000 acres, but surely a definite figure is easy to establish. Needed, too, is a detailed soil survey to end for all time debate about how deep the muck is, where it is and what can be built on it.

A survey could also suggest financing plans, not so much in terms of a specific sum to be expended but rather in terms of HOW financing could be undertaken—by an authority, by a redevelopment commission, by direct assessment on property owners or by some other method. This facet of the study would also settle the thorny question of who really owns the meadows—and what individuals or concerns would profit most by expenditure of local, state or federal funds.

LAND titles are a vague thing, twisted and snarled in deeds and titles going back nearly 300 years, to purchases from Indians in some cases. Early landholders thought meadowland had no value beyond pastureland

or salt hay fields and often when selling their upland holdings completely forgot their meadowland plots. Such forgetfulness 150 or 200 years ago means only a headache to title searchers today.

Holders of large segments of the meadows sometimes are looked upon as speculators, but they are more likely shrewd persons who have been buying meadowland acreage for as long as 50 years. There is nothing un-American or unbusinesslike about buying a piece of land for \$50 an acre in 1909 and asking \$10,000 for it in 1959. Let the buyer beware holds in the Jersey Meadows as well as anywhere else.

What these large landholders have done in some cases, indeed, is advance reclamation by consolidating large patches of land, something most attractive to a would-be builder. Much of the meadows remains in small plots. A recent study of the Newark meadows, for example, showed 178 different plots each less than one acre in extent—many of those less than one-tenth of an acre. One plot was a mere five-thousandths of an acre, or about 200 square feet.

Surely no one would worry about 200 square feet, but think how valuable it would be if a plant went up on the meadows and you came forth after the dedication with the statement that you owned the 200 square feet right under the president's office! Or suppose some developer, without power of condemnation, built a road to the

(Continued on Page 34)



One of the most industrialized areas of the meadows is Kearny Point, stretching between Passaic and Hackensack rivers. Two major firms are Western Electric (center) and Federal Shipyard where the USS Enterprise is being scrapped.



One of many nerve centers is Route 3 as it passes under Route 1 on its way to Lincoln Tunnel. Motels and truck terminals are springing up in the area.



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View of service road of Trans-Continental Gas pipeline near Hackensack River which would serve as eastern "dike" in a reclamation plan.

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THE MEADOWS' FUTURE

(Continued from Page 32)

edge of your 200 feet and wanted to move on. You might get a handsome sum for the rights.

NO company or developer would build without clear title, but they can be costly. There are reports that a title company once refused an offer of one million dollars to produce an inviolable title on one 1,400-acre stretch of meadows assembled from many smaller tracts. It took one company nine years to assemble and gain clear title to a 500-acre tract in Bergen County.

Consider the problem in specific terms, in terms of a couple of acres in the north Elizabeth meadows, deeded to a Miss Polly Ross shortly after the Revolution. Miss Polly later joined a group of New Jerseyans leaving by wagon train for Ohio. The title searcher traced her to Day's Bridge (Chatham), found definite evidence she had been with the Ohio-bound group.

The searcher went to Ohio, picked up the trail of the emigrants, traced them to their Ohio locations, found their heirs. But there was no Polly Ross. Had she died en route? Had

she taken a husband and arrived under her married name? Had she run off from the wagon train with a traveling fur trapper? No one knew—and it took a great deal of legal maneuvering to clear that one title for a mere patch of land.

The moral: Don't rush into meadowland buying without a lawyer, and cash.

But if a survey (local, federal or state) did map the area's extent, establish basic soils and engineering data, set up machinery for financing and clear the tangled skein of property ownership, the greatest question would still remain: What is the exact place of the Jersey Meadows in a comprehensive future regional picture?

THIS is the philosophy of land use, vital above all else. Without a plan, based on long-range needs, spending money to put up dikes and locks and pumping stations could be futile. Should the meadows be industrial, residential, park lands, or all three? Or, perhaps left vacant for future expansion? To permit or encourage immediate piecemeal development might kill the dream.

Mr. Erber sees the wide-open space

as "a God-given chance" to correct some of the mistakes of the past. His aide, Ralph Field, sees the meadowland as a splendid natural resource, demanding judgment and good sense in tapping it. Neither sees any reason to plunge madly ahead because of the "mirage" of state or federal funds in the wilderness of foxtails.

"Consider the meadows as a resource, the same as oil or coal," says Mr. Field. "You wouldn't tap the oil and let it run away just because you had the money, would you? You wouldn't dig the coal if no buyers were in sight. You would study the need and plan for the most advantageous times to tap the oil or dig the coal. The Jersey Meadows are exactly the same kind of resource."

Meanwhile, the onrushing future bogs down in a peculiar indifference on the part of many bordering towns.

COMMUNITIES sometimes forget (or never knew) that they have a potential resource just nearing full value. Sales of municipally owned properties are announced occasionally in the newspapers, quite often at prices that strike an outsider as low (and, at times, also strike a protesting taxpayer or rival politician as meager). This is like selling the town oil wells with no thought that tomorrow must come.

Other evils continue. Garbage con-

tinues to find its way onto the mushy meadow mat to lend both nasal and optical affronts. Smoke belches from stacks. Odors seep out of plants. Sewage pollutes the streams. Factory leavings violate the land. Fringe-type industries arise, apparently with municipal permission. Drainage water tumbles off the hills and seeps into the flatlands. This front door of New Jersey smells no less even though most of the pig farms are gone from Secaucus.

Twenty-five years ago an article in Fortune Magazine on the Public Service Co. devoted a few paragraphs to the Jersey Meadows, detailing the great progress made until that time in industrial development (at Kearny, Newark Airport, Port Newark, etc.). Then the 1934 chronicler told of the smoke, the soot, the garbage, the smells, the pollution, the disorder in the dank rushes.

As his train moved past Snake Hill, the Fortune writer looked out into the marshland and then turned back to his notebook to scribble a question that still gives a meadows student pause:

"Is there something rotten with civilization?"

Optimism one minute, pessimism the next. Out there is an inescapable swing between hope and despair. The challenge is there, the opportunity is clear. Can anyone rise to the occasion?

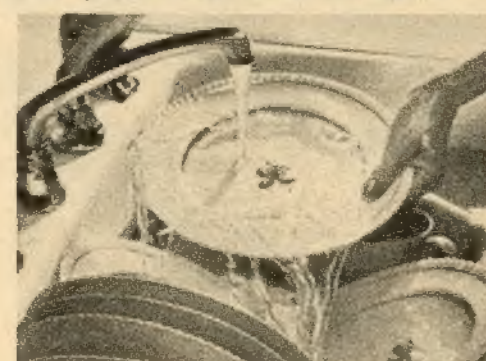
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